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BACK TO BASICS: MAHAN FOR THE 1990s

by

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Analysis of views of RADM Alfred T. Mahan on naval strategy and the conditions that affect sea power, and its relevance to maritime strategy and sea power today. Author concludes that sea control is essential to forward defense and that peacetime support of Navy and civilian maritime industry are necessary for the deterrence of war.

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BACK TO BASICS: Mahan for the 1990s

James J. Tritten

For Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan the objective of a navy was to establish sea control, to ensure the unfettered use of the oceans for economic and political benefit in peace and war. The intervening one hundred and fifty years have not changed this basic goal. As technologies have advanced, international relations grew more complex, and bureaucracies have multiplied, this basic maritime goal has been obscured. Perhaps it is time to review Mahan's basics of maritime policy and strategy from today's perspective.

MAHAN ON NAVAL STRATEGY

Western navies must maintain the capability to control the sealines of communication (SLOCs) during war so that shipping can voyage from one theater to another and support the land war. Control of the SLOCs may be obtained either by destroying the enemy battle fleet, or preventing that fleet by other means from attaining its mission.

Battle and Blockade

Mahan posited two primary methods of ensuring control over ocean areas. The first is a decisive battle in which fleet is pitted against fleet. The victorious fleet destroys the opposing force so that no ships remain to threaten the SLOCs. This was the preferred method of Mahan's era and remains the strategy of choice today.

A decisive naval battle remains a distinct possibility, although it has assumed forms undreamed in Mahan's day. Fleets may now engage without ever sighting each other. They may also be engaged by other services in the maritime theater, or be supported by them. Air support, modern electronics, space surveillance, nuclear weapons, and long range, land-based missiles have changed the parameters of armed conflict.

An equally acceptable method of gaining sea control is to contain an opposing force, blockaded in port or in restricted waters, where it cannot affect the SLOCs. This is more difficult today since submarine and land-based missile forces can remain in port and effectively cut the SLOCs at the terminals. However, blockades are effective and are used, witness the recent events in the South Atlantic. They are still planned for, as documented by the basic operational concepts behind our Navy Maritime Strategy.

There are special areas of the oceans where alternative methods of attaining sea control have been used. For instance, in the Caribbean, control of harbors and bases used to support cruisers engaged in commerce raiding, was an acceptable alternative to eliminating the cruisers. Similarly, Mahan pointed out the value to Great Britain of controlling key straits and coaling stations in the Royal Navy's ability to control the seas. This lesson has not been lost on the Russian "bear" who is extending his overseas presence in an attempt to do the same.

In general, Mahan saw little utility in a war against ports and bases without mutually reinforcing naval power exercised on the oceans. He also saw little use in random patrols over the vast open oceans as a method of sea control. Instead he favored seeking out the enemy's Navy and either engaging it or keeping it bottled up.

For Mahan, naval engagements ensured that shipping would flow and wealth would continue to accumulate to the State. Today we still must exercise sea control in crisis or war to ensure that vital raw materials, finished products, and energy resources are delivered, and that men and material can be shipped from bases in the strategic reserve to wherever they are needed.

History records that large ships with superior firepower are often decisive in attaining victory at sea. Mahan documented classic battles between the CONSTITUTION and the GUERRIERE, and the WASP and FROLIC to illustrate the point that "advantage in maneuvering greatly increases the ability of the inferior to serve his own cause, but does not constitute superiority."[1] Firepower alone, however, cannot win every battle. More often a combination of firepower, maneuverability, and decision-making is crucial to victory at sea. Rodney's cutting into the battle line at the Battle of the Saints, the CONSTITUTION against JAVA; and actions during the Battle of Lake Erie are such examples. Maneuver alone rarely determines the outcome of naval battle. Fortunately for the embryonic United States, the strategic maneuver of the Comte de Grasse in bringing his fleet to the

Virginia Cape proved critical in the outcome of the Yorktown campaign and thus the entire war.

These largest of ships, however, are not always available in war due to a restrictive political climate, economic constraints, or operational factors such as great distances or base locations. The Soviet Union did not have a balanced fleet at the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War due to political and economic decisions made at the highest levels of the Party and government, despite the demands of sound naval theory and recommendations by the Navy to create such a fleet. Thus, it is not sufficient to adopt good military theories: successfully convincing political leaders is equally necessary.

Battle Strategy

The concentration of firepower at critical junctures is generally critical in deciding military operations. Hence, Mahan favored combining resources and fighting forces, and argued against splitting the fleet. Mahan recognized the need to manage perceptions by providing an illusion of weakness. Forces could be split locally into main and reserve fleets. The decision, therefore, when to combine forces and commit strategic reserves to battle is as crucial as deciding the method of main attack.[2]

Whether, or when, to initiate hostilities is another monumental decision facing the naval commander. Engagement should be avoided until some critical advantage is gained. In the War of 1812, Mahan was extremely critical of the American government because it declared war and initiated ill-timed hostilities. The

U.S. government failed to direct its Navy to immediately raid unalerted British merchants in North American waters who had insufficient escorts to protect them. Seizing the initiative and maximizing opportunities should be initiated regarding vulnerable targets (such as Soviet merchant, research, fishing and intelligence fleets) in any future war.

Surprise can often turn the tide of a naval encounter. Mahan had only praise for Nelson's resourcefulness and innovative dusk attack on the French at Aboukir. Countering a possible surprise Soviet attack poses a dilemma for Western naval forces. NATO is a defensive alliance, with no aggressive plans to strike first. This means that naval force levels must be robust enough to absorb losses incurred by a Soviet first strike, or that naval forces must have rules of engagement that differ from those given to land armies. Western navies could, of course, enhance the survivability of vital assets by not deploying them in forward exposed areas, but such an obvious shift in policy might send unwanted signals. Projecting an unwillingness to fully use the seas could undermine the perception vital to deterrence of a determination to exercise power.

Where to fight is a further concern to naval strategists. For a coastal state like the United States, the Navy is the first line of defense, and should be employed as close to an enemy's coastline as possible. "The front of operations of a powerful fleet should be pushed as far towards the enemy as is consistent with the mutual support of the various detachments, and with

secure communication with their base. . .the navy is the first line of defense. . ."[3]

Our national forward based defense doctrine of committing land forces in peacetime to Europe and Asia is an outgrowth of this philosophy, together with the determination to fight all future land wars on foreign soil rather than in the homeland. To sustain them, our forces require adequate logistical support, which must come via the sea.

Obviously, one should fight and win at decisive geographical points. In sea warfare, such foci are often located at strategically important narrow waterways or "choke points." However, a direct assault on choke points is not always the optimum answer. An indirect approach may be warranted. For example, Mahan wrote that to take Gibraltar, the Spanish should have threatened the English Channel, causing the British to withdraw from peripheral outposts to defend the homeland. Napoleon adopted an indirect strategy when he attempted to reach London via Egypt. Mahan argued that he should have instead attacked the real basis of British power - the Royal Navy and commercial shipping. If American power is indeed dependent upon the ability to use the seas, should we not anticipate Soviet moves to blunt that strength, in war and peace?

American victories in Canada during the War of 1812 were tactically brilliant, but never achieved the desired political results. Perhaps, had the U.S. directed its operations against the sea power which sustained British forces in Canada, victory

in the war might have come more readily. The point is that confronting the enemy may sometimes be the right thing to do, but as often it is not.

Mahan credited the Comte De Grasse with the successful conclusion of the American War of Independence. But he was clearly disappointed with him when, following his brilliant maneuver in support of Yorktown, De Grasse fought the British in the West Indies and failed to take the initiative and attack while he had the advantage. De Grasse suffered a major defeat in what Mahan calls the greatest naval battle of the 18th century, the Battle of the Saints.

Where to fight is a strategic decision which should be made once the objectives of the campaign have been decided. Mahan's clear message is that, in many of the wars he studied, the objectives were not properly identified. Where to fight is a contemporary problem for NATO planners. Some future naval campaigns are relatively predictable: the Baltic exits, against Western high value units in the Mediterranean, and at SLOC terminals. But what of the Norwegian and Barents Seas and the polar region?

The dilemma of course, is that to fight in the Arctic requires the most robust types of Allied naval forces, which are the most expensive and the most difficult to procure. Battle here could provide the Soviet's advantages of supporting air power and surveillance. Failure to say NATO will fight in the Norwegian Sea, however, implies that a member of the Alliance might be

largely abandoned. In addition, the Soviet fleet could usurp control and use portions of the sea in a manner that is contrary to Allied war termination aims.

Finally, when to terminate a battle is a decision which often proves critical. Perry exercised sound judgment when he chose to temporarily stand down in the face of unexpected, superior British firepower in the Battle of Lake Erie. Likewise, Nelson's actions at Copenhagen resulted in an early victory, minimized losses to both sides, and did not leave the loser needlessly embittered. What type planning, if any, goes on inside the Pentagon concerning how to terminate wars?

Sea Control

A major topic of debate over the procurement of American naval forces today is whether those forces contribute to sea control, especially those that support SLOC protection. Sea control forces may have a better chance of support in Congress than those described as being designed for offensive power projection. Some in Congress believe that sea control forces are less expensive.

By remaining on the defensive in convoys and avoiding battle unless engaged by an enemy, Western Navies would be guilty of the same mistakes which Mahan attributed to the French when they fought the British for control of world empires. If we adopt a defensive posture of local sea control with convoy assets, we are inviting disaster.

Sea control of the Atlantic SLOCs requires using "power projection," blockading Soviet assets to keep the bulk of the Soviet Navy bottled in the Baltic, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and north of the G-I-UK gap. Sea control of the North Atlantic will demand "power projection" assets to handle Soviet fleet units caught outside the protective umbrella of "bastion" defensive areas. It will require advanced (not inexpensive) "defensive" convoy assets as point defense against high technology "leakers." Sea control of the North Atlantic will require our most sophisticated subsurface, surface, and air assets to project NATO naval power or defend mid-ocean areas where the Soviets may choose to fight a war of attrition. Those operations are crucial to allow our reinforcements and supplies to get through to Europe, and allow raw materials and finished products to arrive safely in North America.

Building before a war the right types and numbers of ships for duty during that war is difficult for many reasons. Social scientists have yet to predict accurately when wars will occur. The ships that often prove decisive during a war are commonly those viewed as too expensive before that war. Mahan records a debate over the type of navy needed and actually procured before the War of 1812 and reminds us that purchasing the right kind of ships before the war would have been far less costly than the war itself.

The Soviet Union faces similar problems. Its MOSKVA and KIEV class air-capable ships are of limited value during a war

with NATO. Yet these same ships have potential utility during lesser conflicts, crises, and for peacetime presence.

Although Mahan had little use for guerre de course, the late Fleet Admiral Sergei Gorshkov understood how submarines, properly supported, could have affected the outcome of both World Wars. The Soviet Navy has built impressive but inexpensive sea-denial forces which often sail in company with Western high value units. These Soviet assets can be expected to strike first and attempt to eliminate Western forces vital to Allied sea control and power projection. If successful, technologically inferior KIEV and BREZHNEV class carriers could traverse the G-I-UK gap and threaten any surviving NATO forces.

Mahan on Naval Policy

Mahan affirmed that six conditions affect the sea power of States. These conditions are: (1) geographical position, (2) physical conformation, (3) extent of territory, (4) population, (5) character of people, and (6) character of government. For our purposes these conditions are combined into the three broader categories of geography, people and government, and will be examined for their relevance to current policy.

Geography

Beneficial geographic position remains a significant advantage that enables certain states to become major sea powers. Great Britain and the United States have capitalized on this, and retain certain intrinsic and distinct maritime advantages. Poor

geographical position is a liability, as in the case of the Soviet Union. However, achievement of great power status does not depend entirely upon maritime position, and the Soviet Union became a superpower without being a great sea power.

Mahan included in his geographical analysis the necessity to extend one's territory to provide markets for a nation's products, and to support the SLOCs to those markets. The need for coaling stations and overseas bases to defend and support the SLOCs has somewhat, but not entirely, diminished in an age of large ships and nuclear power. Due to geographic realities, sea power is crucial for healthy American, Japanese, Middle-Eastern and European economies. To sustain sea control operations or maintain a peacetime presence, substantial foreign-based logistical support is still required.

For the United States, logistical support depends on using American or Allied facilities or foreign/joint bases and ports. British success in the Falklands War was successful due, in part, to the presence of a relatively obscure island (Ascension) in the South Atlantic. The preferred Soviet method of replenishment is to use Naval Auxiliaries or civilian merchant ships to purchase consumables in foreign ports and resupply warships and auxiliaries at sea. This minimizes the necessity for formal overseas bases. Either way, as much as navies like to advertise their freedom from cumbersome logistical tails, they are still tied to supporting overseas stations and friendly ports of call.

Perhaps the most important aspect of geography and sea power, however, is that despite the great importance of overseas bases and SLOCs, the great issues of war and peace are determined on land. Those of us concerned with navies and maritime power must not forget that sea power alone cannot "win the war" against a continental power. On the other hand, without sea power, national greatness or political victory may not be possible. The simple realities of geography and a rational desire to maintain a formal political, military and economic presence abroad destines the United States to be a maritime nation.

People

Although favorable geographic position is vital for a successful sea power, Mahan gives ultimate preeminance to people and their character. Simply put, there must be a population sufficient to defend the territory, man the ships, and comprise a reserve manpower pool for the maritime forces required in war and peace.

Overall numbers of people, however, are not enough. The population must have a maritime outlook including a tradition of trading and taking that trade to sea. There must be a supporting industrial infrastructure to provide commodities for commerce, shipbuilding, ship repair, and other trades necessary to build and outfit ships. This infrastructure sustains either peaceful commerce or a war effort.

The Soviet Union has increased its presence at sea with its Navy. The Soviet merchant, fishing, and research fleets also

raise the level of consciousness of the sea for a nation which is traditionally landbound. Raising this consciousness, their willingness to support naval power is enhanced. By the same token, we should consider whether the United States has lost its maritime consciousness.

Mahan studied the history of the maritime campaigns of 1600-1812, to determine whether any strategic lessons could be deduced. Perhaps most obvious is that a State needs ships to fight at sea, and men to fight those ships. Most important is the need for good Navy seamen. Mahan noted that the French lost as many ships to poor seamanship as the English and Dutch did to enemy action in at Beachy Head, a major battle during the War of the League of Augsburg.[4] When faced with a choice between good men or good ships, Mahan came squarely down on the side of good men, even if it meant sailing them in less than optimal ships.

Mahan argued that Navy men must be real Navy men, schooled in naval tactics, aggressive, innovative, and thoroughly familiar with their weapons systems and the sea. They needed to train their crews constantly and exercise while underway. Mahan saw no substitute for the training and experience that operations at sea provided.

Western navies have not forgotten this lesson through inattention or indifference, but have been forced to reduce steaming days by budget constraints. The Soviets are similarly constrained, and spend much time at anchor while deployed overseas. Perhaps this is the price Admirals Gorshkov and

Chernavin had to pay to obtain the large numbers of ships they desired. Will the Soviets, or will we, have the depth of experience required when forced to operate in sustained at-sea operations? Developing the skills needed to win battles at sea requires constant training which can be done only at sea and underway, which costs money.

Mahan saw only one type of warrior mentality which would lead to victory: innovative, aggressive, and offensive campaigns which would result in the elimination (or neutralization) of all enemy opposition. A defensively oriented mindset allows the enemy the choice of when to fight, stifles initiative and results in officers who actively seek to avoid battle or are incapable of attaining victory if forced to engage. The U.S. Navy has a tradition of promoting and retaining aggressive officers who are capable of taking the risks necessary to win battles. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, treats innovation as taking aggressive actions to carry out the initial plan even in the face of unexpected obstacles.

Another topical issue is "should one fight as one trains?" How one practices depends on formal naval policy, leadership, seamanship, good discipline, and organization among other factors. Most of these are determinable in peace prior to a war. One cannot routinely count on the brilliance of a Suffren or a Comte de Grasse surfacing, ignoring faulty policy and taking decisive actions.

Mahan also discouraged dependence on assistance from allies, especially if the ally was party to a civil war. One wonders how much the Soviet Union counts on support from its "fraternal" allied navies. If a naval force is to be sent to perform a task, sufficient national forces should be sent to complete the operation unassisted. Yet today, NATO sea control of the Atlantic depends upon the unverifiable cooperative effort of all the Allied navies; maritime superiority requires a coalition strategy; the Maritime Strategy assumes cooperation by critical nations. Are there plans to fight wars in Europe by American forces without the active participation of those nations?

Government

Mahan wrote that national character and geographic position were the two crucial conditions affecting sea power. He concluded that governments could also be extremely helpful but rarely were. Governments which fully understood the nature of sea power were the exception rather than the rule. Popular forms of government, Mahan argued, were particularly remiss at funding peacetime military establishments.

The cost of actually fighting a war contrasted to the cost of adequate peacetime preparation is one of the major issues which Mahan addressed in his study of the War of 1812. Mahan urged his readers to ignore the splendid but peripheral individual victories and battles, especially the then-popular Battle of New Orleans. Instead, he advised concentrate on the effects of the British commercial blockade, which ruined the

American economy, and on the lack of adequate military preparation, which could have deterred the War.[5]

Mahan argued that America had the geographic position and national character necessary to enter the ranks of great powers. It appeared to him that only the government was holding the U.S. back from achieving the greatness it deserved. The opportunity was ripe, in the late 1800s, to replace Great Britain as the dominant power in the Caribbean and South America, but government leadership and support were necessary but lacking.

Funding adequate military and naval power in times of peace has often been difficult. It will surely be even more difficult in the next decade. Despite its reputation as a great maritime nation, even Great Britain entered many maritime wars not fully prepared. Hence Mahan's choice was to argue not for a Navy, but rather for commercial sea power which, he knew, would generate a requirement for naval power to protect it. Navies require substantial resources from a State to grow and be sustained during war, and these resources could be increased in the 1800s by the accumulation of wealth from overseas colonies and sea trade between them and a mother country. Today we have no simple remedy to generate the resources necessary to sustain our sea power.

Mahan also recognized that the infrastructure of shipbuilding, outfitters, and ship repairmen which was crucial to a Navy in time of war, needed to be sustained by commercial ventures in times of peace. Civilian merchant seamen constituted

a reserve pool of manpower which the Royal Navy expected to tap when needed. This interrelationship between civilian sea power and the Navy remains valid today.

Navies alone cannot hope to carry out national strategies in support of forward operations and long wars. For this, the nation must look to its civilian fleet and shipbuilding capacity. No finer example can be found than the Falklands campaign, and the response of the British maritime industry. Its rapid implementation of contingency plans is a rousing example for other maritime nations to follow. Some 59 ships were taken from commercial service, and 45 actively utilized. Flight decks were improvised, underway replenishment equipment was added, and fishing craft were commissioned as minesweepers. Most maritime ships kept their civilian crews, supplemented only by small Navy or Royal Fleet Auxiliary contingents.

The West must maintain the capability to fight a sustained conventional war in order to deter one. The acknowledged capacity to sustain the war effort longer than the adversary can sustain its effort is central to deterrence. This capacity requires shipyards to rehabilitate our reserve warships and merchants, to repair battle damaged warships, to make good initial combat losses, and to provide a sustained sealift capability.

Western navies lack sufficient State owned resources to carry out these strategies. It is national policy that the civilian sector and reserve forces provide the necessary resources to fight and win a long war. In peace we need to

sustain that capability for national defense reasons even if it is economically inefficient. Sustaining civilian shipbuilding, ship repair, a Merchant Marine, and men in the varying seafaring trades is costly, just as is the current rebuilding of the fleet itself. Our maritime industry is part of our national defense force necessary to deter war.

Today, the Soviet Merchant Marine challenges the West in the world's shipping trades. Even competing at fair rates, their state supported operations are causing Western shippers and shipbuilders to fail. If this continues, the manpower needed to sail our merchant fleet will dwindle. Ship repair yards will fold, as will shipbuilders. The Soviets know we need our Merchant Marine for our defense policies. What better way for the Soviets to eliminate this important vital component? What finer example is there of a competitive strategy?

National defense is not a profit making venture. It is time to admit that the civilian aspects of sea power are a vital form of national defense and need our continuous support. If we turn from the sea, will we not be making the same mistake Mahan asserted the French made when they abandoned efforts to contest British naval supremacy?

There are some very real economic arguments against maintaining Western military and merchant sea power. However, unless we are prepared to fight our battles over "here" rather than over "there," we cannot abandon the sea and forward defense. There is no guarantee that future hostilities will be either

nuclear or so short as to make sustainability irrelevant. To execute the strategy for deterring or fighting a conventional or long war, military and civilian sea power are vital. Sea power is also vital to deterrence of conventional war by threatening to deny victory to any aggressor. Therefore sea power must be supported, and if necessary, subsidized by the government.

Mahan challenged the U. S. government to determine its need for sea power in order to take its place among the great powers. There were substantial economic and political rewards to be reaped. Today we face a similar challenge. If Western military doctrines and strategy are to remain centered around forward defense, horizontal escalation and escalation over time; and if deterrence is achieved by threatening to either deny victory to an enemy or to punish him for excesses, the civilian components of sea power and the necessary supporting naval power must be built and maintained.

It is not enough to have the forces that deter war by threatening to escalate vertically to nuclear weapons. Deterrence also depends upon the ability to fight a sustained conventional conflict - a longer war than the enemy can manage - and in any region of the globe. This, combined with our forward defense doctrine, dictates a capability to reinforce and resupply any overseas location.

Mahan had strong opinions about the internal working relationships between governments and navies. He saw government's role as setting policy and priority, while the Naval service

should be trusted to decide the best way to carry out those policies. Wherever government meddled and dictated means to navies Mahan was quick to point out the disastrous results. If the population and the government can be convinced to fund a Navy, the next step is for the Navy to ensure that the correct types of forces are built. This decision should properly be left to the Navy.

In discussing which types of ships should have been built prior to the War of 1812, Mahan concluded that a mere squadron of sloops instead of "Jeffs" gunboats would probably have been sufficient to carry out a successful war on commerce. Such a squadron could have been used in coordinated attacks against British shipping in nearby Caribbean waters to strike a lethal blow at the economic and sea power which sustained the British war effort.[6]

When non-maritime government officials dictate the types of ships to build to carry out policy, the results are often disastrous. Mahan's study of the War of 1812 documents President Thomas Jefferson's inexperience in nautical affairs and his insistence on building many smaller ships instead of fewer larger ones. Mahan recounts a similar debate in the Royal Navy when Napoleon built a fleet a small ships and boats to invade Britain. The Admiralty, knowing of this new threat, wisely stuck to larger ships of the line, and thus had the forces and trained men to defeat the French and Spanish navies, and thereby affect the land war.[7]

Of interest is the opinions of the late Fleet Admiral Gorshkov on who should make decisions about what types of ships are needed in the fleet:

> "The closer attention paid by the leaders taking crucial decisions on the development of the navy to the recommendations of the research institutions and the views of naval officers on active service and their appreciation of the possibilities of industry, the sounder will be their decisions and the more painless the process of building the fleet, and in the end the less it will cost to build and the more powerful it will be."8

Conclusion

Mahan has much to say to us. The basic naval goal remains free use of the seas in peace and war. Clearly, the United States today has enough of Mahan's indices of geography, population and government to achieve sea control. Only the will is in doubt. That will can be supplied by rational appraisal of our goals and necessities.

Our first goal is to deter all war, nuclear and conventional. We have learned that deterrence stems from strength. Failing deterrence, our second goal is to keep the war away from the homeland. Sea control is essential to forward defense. If we cannot supply our troops over "there," and if we cannot sustain the war effort over time, surely we will have to fight over "here." Peacetime support of the Navy and fostering civilian maritime industry is as necessary today as in Mahan's time. These forces are expensive to maintain, but the alternative is to risk the unthinkable.

Rather than consider Mahan and similar military and naval historians unnecessary due to obsolesence of fighting machines, the United States military services should assume leadership roles in sponsoring military history as a legitimate academic discipline. We have endless pre-war theories how combat will occur and how effective weapons systems will be. The study of actual combat, not theoretical combat, remains the best way to learn how men actually respond under fire, and the accuracy of pre-war predictions and concepts. Why study Mahan in the Twenty-first century? Because we cannot afford not to.

NOTES

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